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ABSTRACT

There are clear differences in acquisition and developmental patterns between conversational language and academic language, or BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency). The conceptual distinction between these two levels highlights misconceptions about the nature of language proficiency which contributes to academic failure among bilingual students. Differences in the rate of acquisition of the two levels needs to be considered so that the academic language education of bilingual children with good conversational English ability does not suffer. An instructional program for bilingual students should address: (1) cognitive skills; (2) academic content; and (3) critical language awareness. (EF)

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BICS and CALP: Clarifying the Distinction

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I welcome the opportunity offered by Bernardo Garcia's discussion of BICS and CALP to clarify aspects of the distinction. I originally suggested the distinction between *basic interpersonal communicative skills* and *cognitive academic language proficiency* 20 years ago (Cummins, 1979) as a qualification to John Oller's (1979) claim that all individual differences in language proficiency could be accounted for by just one underlying factor, which he termed *global language proficiency*. Oller synthesized a considerable amount of data showing strong correlations between performance on cloze tests of reading, standardized reading tests, and measures of oral verbal ability (e.g. vocabulary measures). I pointed out that not all aspects of language use or performance could be incorporated into one dimension of global language proficiency. For example, if we take two monolingual English-speaking siblings, a 12-year old child and a six-year old, there are enormous differences in these children's ability to read and write English and in their knowledge of vocabulary, but minimal differences in their phonology or basic fluency. The six-year old can understand virtually everything that is likely to be said to her in everyday social contexts and she can use language very effectively in these contexts, just as the 12-year old can. Similarly, in second language acquisition contexts, immigrant children often acquire peer-appropriate conversational fluency in English within about 2 years but it requires considerably longer (5-10 years) to catch up academically in English (Collier, 1987; Cummins, 1984). Thus, there are clear differences in acquisition and developmental patterns between

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conversational language and academic language, or BICS and CALP. The distinction receives strong support from Biber's (1986) analysis of an enormous corpus (more than one million words) of authentic discourse gathered from a wide range of communicative situations, both written and oral.

Failure to take account of these data led to inappropriate psychological testing of bilingual students and premature exit from bilingual or ESL support programs into "mainstream" classes where students received minimal support for continued academic language development. In other words, the conceptual distinction between BICS and CALP highlighted misconceptions about the nature of language proficiency that were contributing directly to the creation of academic failure among bilingual students.

Bernardo Garcia's major concern appears to be that bilingual students are being "kept from certain intellectual experiences" and their "full participation … in instructional activities" is postponed until they are considered to "have CALP". He also points out that there are "situations in which CALP is achieved before BICS" (p. 8) (e.g. the scientist who reads a text written in a language which she doesn't speak).

A few points of clarification are in order. The sequential nature of BICS/CALP acquisition was suggested as typical in the specific situation of immigrant children learning a second language. It was not suggested as an absolute order that applies in every, or even the majority of situations. Thus attainment of high levels of L2 CALP can precede attainment of fluent L2 BICS in certain situations. The point remains, however, that these dimensions of language are conceptually distinct. For example, cognitive skills are undoubtedly involved in one's ability to tell jokes effectively and if we work at it we might improve our joke-telling ability throughout our lifetimes. However, our joke-telling ability is largely unrelated to our academic performance. And the fact remains that phonological skills in our native language and our basic fluency reach a plateau in the first six or so years; in other words, the rate of subsequent development is very much reduced in comparison to previous development. This is not the case for literacy and vocabulary knowledge (CALP) which continue to develop at least throughout our schooling and usually throughout our lifetimes.

To say that BICS and CALP are conceptually distinct is not the same as saying that they are separate or acquired in different ways. Developmentally they are not necessarily separate; all children acquire their conceptual foundation (knowledge of the world) through conversational interactions in the home. Similarly, discussion about conceptual issues is an important, and in many situations essential, way of deepening our understanding of concepts and developing critical literacy. By the same token, cognitive skills are involved, to a greater or lesser extent, in most forms of social interaction.

This intersection of the cognitive and social aspects of language proficiency, however, does not mean that they are identical or reducible one to the other. The implicit assumption that conversational fluency in English is a good indicator of "English proficiency" has resulted in countless bilingual children being "diagnosed" as learning disabled or retarded. Despite their developmental intersections, BICS and CALP are conceptually distinct insofar as they follow different developmental patterns. To re-iterate the point: both native-English-speaking and immigrant children usually reach a plateau in the development of native-like phonology and fluency after several years of acquisition but CALP continues to develop throughout schooling.

An additional point is that the distinction was not proposed as an overall theory of language but as a very specific conceptual distinction which had important implications for policy and practice. The fact that the distinction does not address issues of sociolinguistics or discourse styles or any number of other linguistic issues is irrelevant. The usefulness of any theoretical construct should be assessed in relation to the issues that it attempts to address, not in relation to issues that it makes no claim to address. To suggest that the BICS/CALP distinction is invalid because it does not account for subtleties of sociolinguistic interaction or discourse styles is like saying: "This apple is no good because it doesn't taste like an orange."

What are the policy implications for instruction of the fact that immigrant students usually require at least five years to catch up to grade norms in L2 CALP? Garcia is correct in noting that the distinction says nothing about the appropriate time to introduce English reading or other forms of cognitively challenging content instruction in English. The distinction is not addressed to this issue. The distinction and related research *does* suggest that if English language learning students are transitioned into a "mainstream" class in

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which the teacher knows very little about how to promote academic skills in a second language, then they are unlikely to receive the instructional support they need to catch up academically. The distinction also suggests some clear reasons related to inappropriate assessement why bilingual students are seriously over-represented in classes for the learning disabled or mildly handicapped and under-represented in classes for gifted and talented students.

Garcia also mentions the interdependence between L1 and L2 CALP which I have also termed the common underlying proficiency (CUP). This notion derives from the fact that L1 and L2 CALP tend to be strongly related to each other and strong promotion of L1 literacy in school in the early grades entails no adverse consequences for English. These statements reflect an enormous amount of research data; they are not based on theoretical speculation. The theoretical constructs of CUP and the BICS/CALP distinction can be used to account for aspects of these research data (Cummins, 1984, 1996).

I have argued that a bilingual program should be a genuine bilingual program with coherent and planned introduction of English reading and writing, together with reading and writing in the students' L1. In dual language immersion programs where English L1 and Spanish L1 students are in the same classes, both groups developing biliteracy, there is no problem delaying the introduction of English language arts for one or two grades and focussing on Spanish language arts. English language arts are introduced strongly in grade 2 and increased in a coherent way throughout the elementary school. The results are extremely good for both groups (Cummins, 1996).

However, what is not appropriate is to have minimal English literacy instruction in the early grades of a transitional bilingual program and then at the grade 3 level transition students into an all-English classroom with no support for language learning. In the context of early-exit transitional bilingual education, students require a strong English literacy development program in the early grades just as they require a strong Spanish language literacy program. We should work for transfer of conceptual knowledge and language awareness across the student's two languages (e.g. have grade 1 and 2 students write, illustrate, and publish bilingual books). The languages enrich each other if taught appropriately (e.g. drawing students' attention to cognates and examples of powerful language use in both oral and written modes). A bilingual program without a strong focus on providing

intellectually challenging literacy activities in English is no more adequate than a bilingual program without a strong focus on providing intellectually challenging literacy activities in Spanish. We need to focus on *both-and* rather than reduce ourselves to *either-or*.

An instructional program in bilingual, ESL or "mainstream" classes designed to promote bilingual students' CALP should address the three components of the construct:

> *Cognitive* - the instruction should be cognitively challenging and require students to use higher-order thinking abilities rather than the low-level memorization and application skills that are tapped by typical worksheets or drill-and-practice computer programs;
>
> *Academic* - academic content (science, math, social studies, art etc.) should be integrated with language instruction as in content-based ESL programs (Chamot et al., 1997).
>
> *Language* - the development of critical language awareness should be fostered throughout the program by encouraging students to compare and contrast their languages (e.g. phonics conventions, grammar, etc.) and by providing students with extensive opportunities to carry out projects investigating their own and their community's language use, practices, and assumptions (e.g. in relation to the status of different varieties).

In short, instruction within a strong bilingual program should provide a *Focus on Message*, a *Focus on Language*, and a *Focus on Use* in **both** languages (Cummins, 1988). We know our program is effective, and developing CALP, if we can say with confidence that our students are generating new knowledge, creating literature and art, and acting on social realities that affect their lives. These are the kinds of instructional activities that the BICS/CALP distinction is intended to foster.

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